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AUTHOR Brownell, Mary T.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Telephone interviews concerning special education teacher attrition were conducted with 96 former special education teachers in Florida. Both qualitative and quantitative techniques were used to analyze the interview data. Participants had not returned to their special education teaching positions after the 1992-93 school year. The majority of these leavers indicated that they had taken positions that were education-related. Disgruntled teachers (n=49) made up the largest category of leavers. Nondisgruntled teachers (N=36) made up the second largest category with the remaining 11 being unclear. Disgruntled teachers rarely left because of one factor. Instead, the interaction of factors often resulted in a teacher's decision to leave. Frequently cited reasons included feeling overwhelmed, unsupported, unprepared, and/or disempowered. However, 23 of the disgruntled teachers said they would become a special education teacher again. Nondisgruntled leavers indicated that they enjoyed teaching special education and usually left because of external factors such as other job opportunities, certification requirements, family influences, retirement, position not reoffered, and inadequate pay. Overall, when leavers were asked what could be done to encourage them to return to special education teaching, the largest portion said that no incentives would encourage their return. Others mentioned that more administrative and instructional support would be necessary, or that increased salary and/or a reduced work load would encourage their return. When asked about their future career plans, 54 of the leavers indicated that they wished to remain in education but not in the special education classroom. An attached table details teacher responses. (DB)

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Working Paper

Attrition of Special Educators: Why They Leave and Where They Go

Mary T. Brownell, Ph.D.

Stephen Smith, Ph.D.

David Miller, Ph.D.

University of Florida

Research Assistants

Janet McNellis

Kris Landry

Not for Publication

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Objectives

The objectives of our research were to identify the reasons why special educators leave the special education classroom and determine the occupations they subsequently enter. Information about what teachers do after they leave special education classrooms helps to understand better the effect of teacher attrition on individual schools and school systems. To accomplish these objectives, we conducted individual phone interviews with 103 former special education teachers. The former teachers were part of a larger study of 1,576 special education teachers who completed a survey in March, 1993.

Methodology

Sample

Participants in the phone interviews were 103 randomly selected Florida teachers who did not return to their special education teaching position after the 1992-1993 school year. Because a random sample of special education leavers were drawn, all types of service delivery models (e.g., resource room, self-contained), and various demographic profiles (e.g., race, age, sex) were represented. We did not include teachers in the areas of gifted and speech for two reasons. First, these teachers may experience their own set of unique problems. Second, the federal government does not recognize these certification areas as special education. All other certification areas (e.g., learning disabilities, serious emotional disturbance [SED]) were included. Teachers sampled were employed full-time and teaching on either an emergency or permanent certification. We included emergency certified teachers because of higher attrition rates among this group. Of the 1,576 teachers identified, we excluded 69 potential participants from the sample because they were either not teaching special education or no longer in their position. Of the remaining 1,507 identified respondents, 1208 returned their surveys for an overall response rate of 80.2%.

Using the Florida Department of Education's state data base, we determined that 171 of the teachers who participated in our survey were "leavers" in the 1993-1994 school year. We categorized teachers as leavers if they were not teaching full-time in special education classrooms in the public school system. For example, leavers included those who switched to general education, those who moved to specialist or administrative positions, or those who left the teaching field altogether (see Table 1). We selected a random sample of 103 leavers to interview.

Procedures

We sent each of the selected leavers a letter explaining our research, a list of the interview questions, and a postcard to return to us with their correct address, phone number, and convenient contact times. We then attempted to contact the leavers to conduct the phone interview. Each of our three interviewers engaged in a one-hour training session on conducting telephone interviews and using the interview protocol. Experts in qualitative research conducted the training sessions where interviewers were given instructions for probing and cautioned about leading or suggesting during the interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 5-10 minutes, and was audio-taped and transcribed. Three of the respondents chose to send in written replies to the questions. Our analysis of the written responses revealed that their answers were not notably different from those obtained through the telephone interviews.

The interview protocol consisted of the following questions: (1) What is your current employment situation? (2) What were your primary and secondary reasons for leaving special education? (3) Was there anything the school system could have done to make you remain in the special education classroom? (4) What incentives would cause you

to consider returning to teaching in a special education classroom? (5) What are your future career plans? (6) If you could do it all over again, would you become a special education teacher? These questions were developed by the researchers, based on previous attrition research conducted by Billingsley, Bodkins, and Hendricks (1993).

Response Rate

Out of the 103 leavers that we attempted to contact, 96 agreed to participate in our study. Thus, our final response rate was 93%.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the interviews using qualitative and quantitative analyses. For the qualitative analysis, we transcribed interviews verbatim and then coded units of data. After coding the data, we compared similarly coded data to determine which aspects of reasons stated were always present (see Pfaffenberger, 1988; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Similarly coded data formed categories of responses that we compared to concepts identified in the teacher attrition literature.

We also quantified teacher responses to interview questions. For the first question, we developed a list of 16 broad occupational areas based on the responses given by the participants (see Table 1). We then calculated percentages of teachers in each occupational area. Second, we coded leavers as disgruntled, nondisgruntled, or unable to discern based on their answers to interview questions. We then determined the numbers of teachers represented by each code.

Results

When asked about their current employment status, leavers noted education and noneducation related positions (see Table 1). The majority of leavers indicated that the left and took positions that were education related. The education related positions included, for example, teaching general education, other non administrative positions, administration, district level specialist (e.g., behavior specialist), and substitute teaching. Of the education-related positions, the largest percentage of former special education teachers left to teach general education.

Special educators who left the classroom for non-educational positions made up the second largest category of leavers. We were able to account for the remaining leavers by indicating their positions as either unknown, retired from the system, were on maternity leave, were deceased, or moved out of the country.

Leavers were also asked to describe their primary reasons for leaving the special education classroom. We used these primary reasons and other responses on the interview to categorize teachers as disgruntled, nondisgruntled, and unable to discern. Disgruntled teachers made up the largest category of leavers (n=49). Nondisgruntled teachers made up the second largest category of teachers (n=36). We were unable to determine whether the remaining 11 leavers were disgruntled or nondisgruntled.

Disgruntled Leavers

After placing leavers in the three broad categories, we conducted additional coding to identify broad factors related to leaving. Disgruntled teachers left the classroom primarily because they felt overwhelmed, unsupported, unprepared, and/or disempowered. Interestingly, many of the teachers did not leave because of one factor. Instead, the interaction of factors often resulted in a teacher's decision to leave. For instance, Susan said that she quit teaching after 15 years because she had to manage dangerous students in undesirable work conditions. She said,

> It was very clear that the kids were not wanted there. They had the worst of everything. The kids lacked security. They did not even have a permanent classroom, and they had to move from room to room. They knew they were not wanted. And there was a lack of administrative support. I felt unsafe. I had no buzzer or phone. Some of my kids were very dangerous.

Other teachers stated that high, diverse student caseloads and no paraprofessionals to assist in the classroom lead to frustration. After teaching special education, one out-of-field teacher, Sarah, said that she had too many students and no aide. She spent her last year in special education working with 36 students. In addition, she said that the school was moving towards a multicategorical model and that many of her students were not solely learning disabled. The multiple disabilities were just too much for this teacher to deal with in one room.

In addition to behavior problems and high, diverse student caseloads, teachers felt that they did not have resources and support to assist them. When Karen was asked why she left after 3 years, she said,

> My classload was 20 with no help, with no administrative back-up and every time I would ask for some help I was told I was the one with the special education degree. I had to keep them in the class [because] they did not want them sent to the dean. I got no support. I was told I had to use the county adopted books, but I was never given any resources. And the books they chose were far beyond my kids capabilities. I worked in a [multicategorical] classroom [with students with emotional handicaps and learning disabilities] and before I left they were sticking in [students with educable mental handicaps].

More decision-making power and reduced class size would be incentive for Karen to return. She said that if teachers really had the ability to make decisions about what was best for students and class size was restricted, she would return to the special education classroom.

Some teachers also felt unprepared to cope with the demands presented by special education students, particularly the behavior problems of students with SED. Lenora, an out-of-field teacher, claimed that her first year in special education teaching students with SED was extremely difficult. She said, "You have all these outbursts you don't know quite how to deal with, because in the elementary program you don't have any kind of training or any kind of knowledge of special education." In addition to being unprepared, she lacked appropriate materials for assisting the student. She stated that her students were often operating on a 4th or 5th grade achievement level but that they had seventh grade reading or math books to use.

Another out-of-field teacher, Jackie left because of frustration with all the paperwork and legalities in special education. She said that she liked teaching the students but that the amount of paperwork was unrealistic. When asked if she would become a special educator again, she said, "No, because of the "excruciating" paperwork, the necessity of redoing the paperwork for small errors, [and] all the read tape. The system is failing the kids, and because of that, I cannot support it."

Sources of dissatisfaction for leavers also interacted with outside influences (i.e., raising a family, retirement) in thirteen special education teachers' decisions to leave. For instance, Shawna, after teaching three years, stated that having a baby gave her an excuse to get out of a teaching situation where she received little support from the administration.

When we asked disgruntled leavers if they would become a special education teacher again, 23 teachers said that they would. They felt that they benefited from their experience in special education and enjoyed the children. Unfortunately, other aspects of teaching special education drove them out of the classroom.

Nondisgruntled Leavers

Nondisgruntled leavers specifically indicated that they enjoyed teaching special education. These leavers usually left the special education classroom because of external factors, such as other job opportunities, certification requirements, family influences, retirement, position not reoffered, and inadequate pay. The two largest groups of nondisgruntled leavers left the special education classroom because they were able to obtain a more interesting job in their school district or because they were uncertified. For instance, Mary left after her first year of teaching because a transition consultant position opened in her school and this was her main area of interest. Uncertified teachers claimed that they liked special education but that they either could not remain in their position or were frustrated by certification requirements and decided to return to general education. Louise went back to general education after teaching special education for one year because she could not afford the cost of taken additional certification classes. When asked why she did return to special education, Louise said,

> I did not have certification in it. In order to teach it again, which I [wanted to do], I would have had to ... take more classes. . . . I have a daughter that started college this year and there is just no way I could have afforded to take anymore classes.

Unlike disgruntled leavers, nondisgruntled leavers did not complain about working conditions with the exception of one teacher complaining about restrictions and paperwork imposed by special education legislation and a second teacher noting lack of support from general education administrators and teachers. In addition, nondisgruntled leavers were more likely than disgruntled leavers to transfer into educational positions within the public school system. Nondisgruntled leavers were also less likely to be teaching students with SED in either a resource, self-contained, or day school setting. Fifty percent of nondisgruntled leavers taught SED as opposed to 71 percent of disgruntled leavers.

Unable to Discern

Leavers in this category left because of certification requirements, positions not reoffered, and death. For teachers in the unable to discern category, we were unable to tell from their responses if they were disgruntled or nondisgruntled. The uncertified teachers, however, did express frustrations with certification requirements or note that life events made it impossible for them to consider fulfilling additional certification requirements.

Incentives to Return

When we asked leavers what could be done to encourage them to return to their last position or special education teaching, their responses varied widely. The largest portion of leavers said that no incentives could be provided to encourage them to return to the special education classroom. Many leavers also mentioned that more administrative and instructional support was necessary for them to return to the classroom. In addition, 17 leavers stated that increased salary would encourage them to return. In fact, several leavers stated that the salaries earned in special education were not sufficient to compensate for the stress associated with teaching students with disabilities. A smaller group of leavers suggested a reduced workload would be necessary to encourage them to return. Finally, 5 leavers suggested that flexibility in certification requirements would encourage them to return.

Future Career Plans

We also asked leavers about their future career plans. Fifty-four of the leavers indicated that they wish to remain in education in some capacity but not in the special education classroom. Of these teachers, 21 want to teach in general education classrooms and 16 want to be administrators at the building or district level. Ten leavers indicated that they would like to return to the special education classroom. However, 4 of these teachers indicated that they would only return if conditions were different. Three leavers stated that they would return only as a teacher of preschoolers with disabilities or if they could team teach.

Of the remaining leavers, 13 were uncertain of their career plans with 2 teachers indicating that they may return to special education. Twelve will seek employment or currently are employed outside of education. Finally, one teacher intends to be a mother, another wants to retire, and the remaining teacher would like to work in the public sector establishing programs for school children.

Discussion

The decision to leave the special education classroom is often complex and the result of many factors, particularly when teachers leave because they are disgruntled. In our study, disgruntled leavers frequently gave two and three primary reasons for leaving the special education classroom; whereas, nondisgruntled leavers usually gave one reason for leaving the special education classroom. In fact, disgruntled leavers sometimes commented that there were several primary factors in their decision to leave.

Working conditions often precipitated a disgruntled leaver's decision to leave the special education classroom. These teachers felt overwhelmed by class size, student behavior, insufficient administrative support, a lack of personnel and material resources, and a host of other factors that are beyond remuneration. Because the majority of leavers were disgruntled and indicated that certain incentives would cause them to consider returning to the classroom, careful attention should be paid to the working conditions of classrooms and schools in which teachers operate. Standardized retention strategies, however, will most likely be ineffective given the highly individual nature of a teacher's decision to leave the classroom. Thus, the top-down implementation of policy and interventions that typically occur in education will be ineffective. District and school personnel will need to work collaboratively to develop retention strategies for individual districts and schools. This type of collaboration will be necessary for meeting the individual needs of teachers.

Additionally, the hiring of out-of-field teachers should be reconsidered. Our results indicate that certain general education teachers are well suited for special education but are frequently discouraged by extensive certification requirements. Possibly, uncertified teachers who are committed to teaching special education and capable of effectively instructing students with disabilities could have flexibility in meeting state certification requirements. Quality distance education programs and alternative certification offered by school districts may be a more effective avenue for meeting uncertified special education teachers' needs and is worth further study. State policymakers may also want to consider providing funds to supplement the costs of uncertified teachers obtaining certification in special education. Not all out-of-field teachers, however, should be considered for special education positions. Our results show that 28% of the disgruntled leavers were teaching out-of-field. Thus, administrators must consider carefully the personality and abilities of the general education teacher being hired. If personnel needs in special education must continually be met by hiring out-of-field teachers, then attempts must be made to hire persons who are well suited for teaching special education. Administrators, however, will have difficulty recruiting talented general education teachers for special education unless the position of classroom teacher is made more attractive.

School and district administrators must also carefully attend to the needs of teachers educating students with SED. We found that teachers of students with SED, irrespective of educational setting (i.e., multicategorical resource room, self-contained classroom, or day school) were more likely to voice concerns about workplace conditions and indicate that incentives could not be used to keep them in special education classroom or entice them to return. Apparently, teachers of students with SED need more support and resources to deal with the demands of their jobs. Building principals need to be sensitized to the challenges of educating students with emotional handicaps. Educational leadership programs should provide specific learning experiences that assist building administrators in acquiring the skills necessary for managing student behavior.

Further, recent advances in technology could be used to provide the extra support to all special education teachers. Computer networks have the potential to provide a powerful avenue for collaboration and learning and may serve to reduce the isolation of special education teachers. In addition, teacher educators and school district personnel can use a fiber optic network to provide on-line support to teachers in the classroom. A fiber optic network allows teachers to communicate directly with other persons while they are teaching. Such a technological tool could be used to provide teachers with the feedback that they need to learn more effective instructional and behavioral strategies and may help reduce these teachers' feelings of isolation.

Finally, we found that not all teacher attrition in special education is negative. A substantial portion of the leavers we interviewed intend to remain in education. Consequently, the time, energy, and resources spent educating special education teachers is ultimately returned to the educational system. More problematic, however, is the impact that teacher attrition may have on students with disabilities. If qualified teachers leave the special education classroom, then the education of students with disabilities may be diminished. To date, the relationship between teacher quality and attrition has not been established and is an area worthy of further investigation.

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Table 1

Where Teachers Go When They Leave The Special Education Classroom

Where they go	Number	Percentage[a]
Education Related		
Teaching general education	23	22.3%
Other education position in public school (not administration)	16	15.5%
Administration	6	5.8%
District level specialist	6	5.8%
Substitute teaching	5	4.9%
Teaching special education in private or adult school	5	4.9%
School-level specialist	4	3.9%
Working on graduate degree in special education	2	1.9%
Teaching in special education department in University	1	1.0%
Noneducation Related		
Exit to non-educational field	14	13.6%
Unknown	7	6.8%
Retired	5	4.9%
Maternity - probably will not return	4	3.9%
Deceased	2	1.9%
Maternity - probably will return	2	1.9%
Moved out of the country	1	1.0%
Total	103	100%

[a]Note: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest decimal point.

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Signature: Mary T. Brownell	Position: Assistant Professor
Printed Name: Mary T. Brownell	Organization: University of Florida
Address: Department of Special Education G315 Norman Hall Gainesville, FL 32611	Telephone Number: (904) 392-0701, X 249
	Date: 9/20/95

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